

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 VIENTIANE 0833

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PEPR, VM, US
SUBJECT: U.S./VIETNAMESE RELATIONS

SUMMARY: A WESTERN GROUP RECENTLY RETURNED FROM VIET NAM QUOTES THE VIETNAMESE AS SAYING THAT THEY WANT NORMALIZATION WITH THE U.S. WITHOUT PRECONDITIONS. THE VIETNAMESE APPARENTLY WANT TIES WITH MORE FOREIGN COUNTRIES THAN JUST THE USSR. DIFFICULTIES WITH CHINA, OF WHICH THE KAMPUCHEAN PROBLEM IS SEEN TO BE A PART, PARTICULARLY WORRY HANOI. CONDITIONS IN SOUTH VIET NAM WERE NOT AS GOOD AS THEY HAD BEEN, BUT THE COUNTRYSIDE WAS PROSPEROUS AND PEOPLE WITH JOBS IN THE CITY WERE DOING WELL. END SUMMARY.

1. A GROUP OF FOUR WESTERNERS, THREE OF WHOM ARE AMERICAN CITIZENS, RETURNED TO VIENTIANE AUGUST 5 FROM A TWO-WEEK VISIT IN VIET NAM. IN AN HOUR-LONG CONVERSATION AUGUST 6, THEY PASSED ON THE FOLLOWING OBSERVATIONS ON THEIR TRIP:

2. NORMALIZATION. THE GROUP HELD EXTENSIVE CONVERSATIONS WITH HOANG TUNG, EDITOR OF NAN DHAN AND A PARTY CENTRAL COMMITTEE MEMBER, AND WITH PHAN HIEN, SRV DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER. READING FROM THEIR NOTES, THE GROUP QUOTED HOANG TUNG AS SAYING, "WE WANT TO NORMALIZE RELATIONS WITH THE U.S. AND EXCHANGE AMBASSADORS. WE WANT TO DO
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THIS WITHOUT PRECONDITIONS, AND THE SOONER THE BETTER."

3. THE GROUP SAID THAT THEY HAD WRITTEN A TELEGRAM BACK TO THEIR HEADQUARTERS IN THE U.S. DESCRIBING THEIR CONVERSATION WITH HOANG TUNG. THEY HAD THEN SHOWN THE TEXT OF THEIR TELEGRAM TO PHAN HIEN AND HAD ASKED IF HE WOULD CONFIRM HOANG TUNG'S STATEMENTS ON NORMALIZATION.

PHAN HIEN HAD SAID, "HOANG TUNG IS A JOURNALIST AND I AM A DIPLOMAT. WE NATURALLY EXPRESS THINGS SOMEWHAT DIFFERENTLY. THEREFORE I WILL NEITHER CONFIRM NOR CONTRADICT WHAT YOU SAY THAT HE SAID. HOWEVER, HE AND I USUALLY AGREE."

4. IN DISCUSSIONS ON NORMALIZATION WITH HOANG TUNG AND PHAN HIEN, THE GROUP GOT THE DISTINCT IMPRESSION THAT THE VIETNAMESE WERE FINDING THEIR CURRENT DIPLOMATIC SITUATION UNCOMFORTABLE IN THAT THEY HAD GOOD RELATIONS WITH ONLY ONE FOREIGN COUNTRY, THE SOVIET UNION. THE GROUP QUOTED HOANG TUNG AS SAYING, "TWO FRIENDS ARE BETTER THAN ONE FRIEND, AND MANY FRIENDS ARE BETTER THAN TWO FRIENDS." IN DISCUSSING VIET NAM'S DESIRE FOR NORMAL RELATIONS WITH THE U.S., PHAN HIEN HAD SAID THAT THE SRV WAS WILLING TO BE "FLEXIBLE." PHAN HIEN HAD SAID THAT HANOI WOULD BE "NEITHER STUPID NOR STUBBORN" IN ITS APPROACH TO NORMALIZATION NEGOTIATIONS. (THE GROUP COMMENTED THAT PHAN HIEN HAD SPOKEN IN VIETNAMESE USING AN ENGLISH INTERPRETER, WHOM HE HAD CONTINUALLY CORRECTED, DURING THEIR TALKS. HOWEVER, HE HAS SAID THE "NEITHER STUPID NOR PHRASE HIMSELF IN ENGLISH.) PHAN HIEN HAD SAID THAT THE NEXT MOVE TOWARD NORMALIZATION WAS NOW UP TO THE U.S.

5. WE BRIEFED THE GROUP ON THE DEPARTMENT'S RECENT STATE-CONFIDENTIAL

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MENTS THAT WE HAD NOT YET RECEIVED ANY OFFICIAL INDICATION FROM THE VIETNAMESE THAT THEY HAD DROPPED AN AID COMMITMENT AS A PRECONDITION FOR NORMALIZATION. WE DESCRIBED THE PARIS CHANNEL FOR OFFICIAL COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE SRV. WE RECOMMENDED THAT THE GROUP PASS THEIR IMPRESSIONS ON TO THE DEPARTMENT WHICH MIGHT THEN DECIDE TO CHECK THEM OUT IN PARIS. THE GROUP COMMENTED THAT DESPITE THE APPARENT SHIFT IN THE VIETNAMESE POSITION, HANOI WOULD NEVER COME OUT AND SAY DIRECTLY THAT THERE HAD BEEN ANY CHANGE.

6. COMMERCIAL RELATIONS WITH THE U.S. THE GROUP QUOTED HOANG TUNG AS SAYING THAT THE SRV HAD BEEN "STUPID AND NAIVE" IN ITS RELATIONS WITH FOREIGN BUSINESSMEN. HOANG TUNG HAD SAID THAT THE VIETNAMESE HAD MUCH TO LEARN IN THE CONDUCT OF BUSINESS NEGOTIATIONS. THE GROUP HAD FOUND THE OFFICIALS WITH WHOM THEY HAD SPOKEN EAGER, HOWEVER, FOR MORE EXTENSIVE TRADE AND INVESTMENT RELATIONS WITH AMERICANS.

7. RELATIONS WITH CAMBODIA AND THE PRC. THE GROUP WAS TAKEN TO A KAMPUCHEAN WAR ATROCITY EXHIBIT IN SOUTHERN

VIET NAM, AND THEY ALSO VISITED A VILLAGE WHICH HAD BEEN ATTACKED AND BURNED BY KAMPUCHEAN TROOPS. IN RESPONSE TO OUR QUESTION, THE GROUP SAID THAT THE VIETNAMESE VIEWED THEIR TROUBLES WITH KAMPUCHEA AS COMPLETELY CHINESE-INSPIRED. THE VIETNAMESE HAD SAID THAT NO SENSIBLE KAMPUCHEAN WOULD WANT TO HAVE HIS COUNTRY ATTACK VIET NAM, WHICH WAS MUCH BIGGER, WAS MUCH MORE POWERFUL, AND COULD EASILY DEFEAT KAMPUCHEA IF IT WANTED TO. THE WAR THUS HAD TO BE A CHINESE ATTEMPT TO ATTACK VIET NAM FROM THE REAR, THOUGH SOME VIETNAMESE HAD COMMENTED THAT THE "SMALL POL POT CLIQUE" MIGHT HAVE POLICY AIMS OF ITS OWN. THESE VIETNAMESE HAD SAID THAT THE POL POT CLIQUE WANTED TO REESTABLISH THE OLD ANGKOR EMPIRE. AS

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 VIENTIANE 0833

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EVIDENCE OF THE PRC'S HAND IN THE KAMPUCHEAN PROBLEM, HOWEVER, ONE OF THE VIETNAMESE TO WHOM THE GROUP TALKED HAD POINTED OUT THAT AT THE END OF THE WAR IN 1975, THE KHMER ROUGE ARMY HAD TOTALLED ONLY TWO OR THREE DIVISIONS. THE KAMPUCHEANS NOW HAD 20 DIVISIONS ACCORDING TO THEIR SOURCE, AND THEY COULD ONLY HAVE BUILT UP SUCH A FORCE WITH CHINESE HELP.

8. THE GROUP SAID THAT THEY HAD NOTICED FAR MORE CONCERN AMONG THE VIETNAMESE WITH WHOM THEY HAD TALKED OVER THE DIFFICULTIES ALONG THE CHINESE BORDER. THIS CONCERN HAD BEEN EVIDENT DESPITE THE FACT THAT THERE HAD AS YET BEEN NO MILITARY ACTIVITY SUCH AS THAT ALONG THE KAMPUCHEAN FRONTIER. THE GROUP HAD BEEN TOLD THAT THE PRC'S POLICY WAS TO TAKE OVER VIET NAM AND PREVENT THE SRV FROM BEING TRULY INDEPENDENT.

9. WHEN WE ASKED THE GROUP WHETHER THEIR VIETNAMESE

HOSTS HAD SHOWN ANY APPRECIATION OF PEKING'S CONCERN ABOUT THE SOVIET PRESENCE IN VIET NAM, THEY SAID THAT SUCH CONCERNS HAD BEEN LAUGHED OFF. "EVEN THE STATE DEPARTMENT SAYS THAT THERE IS NO SOVIET BASE AT CAM RANH BAY." THE GROUP SAID THE VIETNAMESE HAD BEEN VERY APPRECIATIVE OF THE DEPARTMENT'S COMMENT ON THIS POINT. WHEN PRESSED ON THE SUBJECT OF THE SOVIETS IN VIET NAM, CONFIDENTIAL

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THE VIETNAMESE HAD POINTED OUT THAT IF THE CHINESE WANTED TO QUARREL WITH THE RUSSIANS, THEY HAD THOUSANDS OF KILOMETERS OF COMMON BORDER TO QUARREL ACROSS AND DID NOT HAVE TO ATTACK VIET NAM.

10. CONDITIONS IN SOUTH VIET NAM. THE GROUP HAD VISITED OLD FRIENDS IN SAIGON. THEY SAID THAT THE URBAN ECONOMY HAD OBVIOUSLY SLOWED DOWN. BUT THAT PEOPLE WHO HAD JOBS AND PRODUCTIVE POSITIONS IN SOCIETY HAD NOT BEEN GREATLY DISTURBED BY THE CHANGE OVER. THEY SAID THAT THE UNEMPLOYED WERE BEING SENT TO NEW ECONOMIC ZONES, BUT THAT MANY SUCH PEOPLE WELCOMED THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO SOMETHING USEFUL. THEY SAID THAT DISSENT WAS TOLERATED SO LONG AS THE DISSENTER WAS STILL WILLING TO WORK AT BUILDING THE NATION. "SO LONG AS THEY'RE WILLING TO WORK, WE DON'T CARE WHAT THEY SAY," THE GROUP QUOTED ONE VIETNAMESE OFFICIAL AS SAYING.

1. THE GROUP HAD NOTICED CONSIDERABLE PROSPERITY IN THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE COUNTRYSIDE, THOUGH THEY SAID THAT GENERAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT HAD BEEN SLOWED BY THE DEMANDS OF THE WAR WITH KAMPUCHEA. THEY SAID THEIR VIETNAMESE HOSTS HAD DESCRIBED THE SITUATION AS "HALF WAR, HALF PEACE." THEY SAID THE VIETNAMESE HAD BEEN VERY RESENTFUL OF THE NEGATIVE EFFECT THE CHINESE AND KAMPUCHEAN DISPUTE HAD HAD ON THE SRV'S DEVELOPMENT PLANS.

12. REFUGEES. THE GROUP SAID THAT THEIR VIETNAMESE CONTACTS HAD BEEN UNDERSTANDABLY RETICENT ON THE SUBJECT OF PEOPLE FLEEING VIET NAM. THE ATTITUDE SEEMED TO BE THAT SOME PEOPLE DID NOT WANT TO PARTICIPATE IN RE-BUILDING THE COUNTRY AND THEY THUS TRIED TO LEAVE. CONFIDENTIAL

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13. COMMENT: THE GROUP COMES FROM AN ORGANIZATION

LONG CONSIDERED FRIENDLY BY HANOI. THE VIETNAMESE
WERE THUS READY AND EAGER TO BE FORTHCOMING AND TO
GIVE AN IMPRESSION OF REASONABLENESS.
ROBERTS

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